

3 March 1979

Ours *U.S. needs ears more than ever*

IF EVER THIS country required the best possible intelligence from abroad, now is the time.

Tensions between China and the Soviet Union are such that a Sino-Soviet war is at least conceivable.

Iran and other states in a vast crescent stretching from Pakistan to South Africa are threatened in varying degrees by Soviet ambitions and, or internal political crisis — developments which bear directly on vital American and Western interests.

The sustained Soviet military buildup during the last 15 years promises Moscow a position of strategic military superiority by the early 1980s.

Peace remains elusive in the Middle East tinderbox.

The gathering storm throughout southern Africa threatens to drag that region into the maelstrom of direct East-West confrontation.

How the White House and Congress react to these events will be based in large part on the adequacy of the intelligence assessments received from the Central Intelligence Agency.

Faulty intelligence will yield faulty decisions.

And how goes the CIA? It isn't necessary to break any secret codes to discover that the agency continues in terrible disarray.

✓ A new wave of resignations and early retirements reflects the sagging morale in CIA ranks.

TAKEN TOGETHER with last year's purge of more than 800 officers of the CIA's clandestine service, the most recent turmoil must further reduce the effectiveness of an agency whose performance has long been suspect.

From the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, the CIA consistently understated the dimensions of the Soviet military buildup by a factor of 50 percent. Add to that catastrophic failure the deficiencies of agency assessments of successive crises from Vietnam to Iran and the scope and costs of CIA mistakes becomes apparent.

The next few years are virtually certain to pose ever more critical threats to the United States and its allies.

Despite these chilling realities, Congress has demonstrated a sense of misplaced priorities to match the CIA's multiple disasters.

The Senate Select Committee on Intelligence has labored for the last two years to draft an "Intelligence Reorganization and Reform Act," the chief purpose of which is to prohibit the CIA from exceeding Marquis of Queensbury rules in gathering information.

Granted there is a need to exert some control over the activities of agents whose zeal has sometimes surpassed the boundaries of propriety.

BUT IN A WORLD of mounting threats to the security of the United States, there is a far greater need to nurture a CIA that can and will provide information essential to this country's survival.

✓ The fact is the Congress has yet to address the real intelligence scandal — the appalling failures of the CIA and its even more alarming deterioration in the last several years. Since taking office, the Carter administration has demonstrated its own inability to restore the nation's eroding intelligence capabilities.

In the absence of proper leadership from the White House, it is left to Congress to begin the task of rebuilding an adequate intelligence organization. A long second look at the Senate Select Committee's "reform" legislation would be a good first step.